Think Before We Build

TRANSPORTATION AND THE ECONOMY

BY DENNIS HEFFLEY

Connecticut faces some big transportation decisions: Expand I-95? Build new links from Hartford to Bradley airport? Replace aging bridges? Improve its ports? Such major investments carry big price tags, and significant ramifications. Now may be a good time to think about how transportation shapes the Connecticut economy, and vice versa.

Whatever our transportation strategy, we should understand that changes in transportation influence the economy, and vice versa.

PAVING PARADISE?

From 1973 to 2003, total road miles in Connecticut increased 14.6%, from 14,856 to 17,024, outpacing the state's population growth over the same period (12.3%) by 2.3 percentage points. Our centerfold (pp.12-13) shows that much of this paving of the state happened in suburban towns (*e.g.*, Avon, New Fairfield, Monroe, Rocky Hill, and South Windsor).

At the other extreme, municipalities with the lowest growth in mileage tended to be our most rural towns (*e.g.*, Scotland, Thompson, Chaplin, Pomfret, Cornwall, and Union) or our largest cities. Urban areas, by their very nature, are already pretty well paved. Even if new development occurs within a city, it may actually reduce the stock of local roads. This is especially true in Connecticut and other New England states, where long-established town boundaries preclude the annexation of surrounding unincorporated areas, a device widely used in western states to accommodate urban growth.

So are we headed down the road described by Joni Mitchell in her hit song of the 70s? Will the Connecticut of 2050 look more like a parking lot than a Currier and Ives postcard?

Whatever transportation strategy Connecticut pursues, it's important to understand that changes in transportation systems influence, and are influenced by, other parts of the economy. Failure to consider these linkages could simply put us back in the same bind, or worse, a few years down the road.

GOOD INTENTIONS

Years ago, the *Washington Transportation Plan* (WTP) laid the groundwork for the Metro rapid transit system, integrating it with dedicated bus lanes and elements of the D.C. transportation network. Unlike many self-styled "comprehensive" plans, the WTP focused on the links between transit modes and their effects on land use. This was refreshingly new. Alas, when pen left the paper, rubber met the road, and steel met the track, most linkages were largely ignored. Metro stations were built with little regard for their impacts on housing demand, property values, location choices, and travel patterns. Bus and HOV lanes were designated, never mind the resulting crowding of regular lanes.

Why would experienced engineers and planners ignore their own warnings and those of others—ignorance? incompetence? corruption? malice? Perhaps. But it's also possible that the linkages are so numerous and complex that waiting to understand and incorporate them would forever delay major construction projects.

The difficulties of making big decisions should not, of course, provide cover for bad decisions. What we know about transportation systems and their interactions with the rest of the economy can at least inform the decision process.

SMILING AT FROGS

Public works shape how we travel, interact with others, and even feel about where we live or visit. A few years back, a much-needed new bridge across the Willimantic River (which once powered thread mills and still harbors frogs) sparked a controversy in greater Willimantic, even inspiring a Doonesbury comic strip. Two large bronze frogs, perched atop massive cement thread spools, guard either end of the new bridge. Critics decried the reptiles as wasteful and demeaning to a New England mill town that frankly has seen better days. But I'll bet that most people who cross the bridge just smile, and that can't hurt public spirits in the struggling Thread City.

It would be an exaggeration to argue that Willimantic's whimsical frog sentinels have transformed the town, boosted property values, or restored civic pride. But changes in transportation infrastructure can have important impacts. Improved roads and new routes alter patterns of movement. Such changes—some favorable, some not—also alter the attractiveness of various locations for households and firms, and hence affect property values. Most local governments, especially in Connecticut, rely heavily on property taxes to finance education and other public services, so any induced changes in tax rates or public spending to balance local budgets can further affect property values.

Transportation policies also interact with state and local land use policies. A new or improved road, or a new rail system like the Metro, will influence demands for particular sites. But the supplies of various types of land (residential, commercial, industrial, agricultural) depend on zoning and land use regulations. Together, these forces shape the resulting property values and land use patterns—usually understandable in economic terms, but not always easy to quantify, control, or factor into transportation policies.

Adding to the complexities transportation planners face are some fundamental changes in family structure and labor markets. The growth of two-income households has altered the calculus of household location decisions. Choices of where to live are no longer dominated by the worksite of a primary earner. Some households choose, Solomonically, to split the distance between two worksites; others opt to live close to one site and have just one grumpy commuter in the household.

HATS OFF TO ENGINEERS

I used to be critical of transportation planners. Why couldn't they see that building new road capacity may create new incentives for development, eventually boosting the demand for travel and restoring the very same road congestion that prompted the new capacity? But I've come to think that most transportation planners, deep down, know that does happen. That they seem to ignore it may simply be the pressure to provide relief to the I-95 commuters of the world.

It does seem, though, that transportation decisions could benefit from a broader view of the problem than just vehicle-miles traveled. Additional lanes of interstate highway, monorails, ring roads, and even frog bridges are big investments. We need to choose intelligently, with input from many sources, sometimes quickly, and occasionally with a smile.

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